WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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House Education Committee:

My name is Tom Pedroni, and I am an Associate Professor of Curriculum Studies in the Division of Teacher Education at Wayne State University. I will be speaking today on one of the claims that the EAA frequently makes: that it uses a curriculum model that is innovative and the first of its kind; that it is student-centered and allows each child to progress at his or her own pace.

The EAA has said that instruction in its schools is primarily organized around a computer-learning platform. For most subjects, each student will individually work at a computer progressing through a curriculum software module.

The EAA erroneously calls this student-centered, presumably because each student progresses through the software at his or her own pace. However, student-centered has a particular meaning in learning theory and curriculum theory. It is used in distinction to "teacher-centered" and "subject-centered". Advocates of a true student-centered approach argue that learning should "begin with the child/children" rather than with the teacher's knowledge of a particular subject area. Student-centered learning is built upon a critique of the notion that teaching is about a teacher, who possesses knowledge, dumping that knowledge into the head of a student/students who do not possess that knowledge. Student-centered learning draws on the insight that the skill of teachers lies in their ability to scaffold new information and new ways of thinking into the knowledge maps and meaning maps of students. For a teacher to effectively teach children, the teacher must know her students—their knowledge, their cultural dispositions, their systems of valuing, the concerns that motivate them, etc. It emphasizes the fact that children are neither blank slates nor uniform, but rather that they have knowledge and identities that are rooted in particular historical and cultural experiences.

Clearly student-centered as described within the educational field and as practiced by qualified teachers is quite different from the EAA's primary vision of exactly one student sitting in front of exactly one computer, with a room full of individuated students constituting a classroom presided over by a teacher who is essentially an operator of the software package. The only difference between the EAA's model and the traditional factory model of learning is that while the discredited factory model involves the teacher dumping knowledge into 25 heads at the same rate, the EAA model has one "teacher" (a computer) attempting to dump knowledge into just one child.

Dr. Thomas C. Pedroni ■ 387 Education Bldg, Detroit, MI 48202 ■ (313) 577-1730
pedroni@wayne.edu

The computerized learning platform not only removes the requirement of an experienced teacher in the classroom, but it also removes all rationale for having students gathered in the same room at the same time in the first place. Bringing students together in a classroom is predicated on the notion that learning is essentially a social experience—that there are learning experiences that can take place in a classroom of fifteen to twenty children that cannot take place in a classroom of one. The EAA's vision of a "classroom of one" in which there are other bodies near you but each is separately absorbed in his or her own compartmentalized learning experience completely misses the boat on what bringing students and teachers together in the same room enables—dialogue, give and take, debate, serendipity, knowledge as a social experience, etc. The EAA's classroom ideal essentially builds a "cubicle" learning experience, wasting the potential of social engagement in learning with teacher(s) and students fully present.

Not only is such a curriculum not student-centered, but it is also not innovative and not individualized. It is not innovative because programs in which an individual student slowly progresses through a curriculum greatly predates the use of computers in classrooms. It was done with paper and pencil decades and decades before being delivered through a "computer learning platform". Such a program is also not individualized because it assumes all students learn in the same way, that there are not particularities of culture or language or belief or experience that need to figure into an individualized learning experience. In fact, the curriculum packages posit a monolithic learner—a uniform idealized student who works effectively with the assumptions and patterns built into the software.

In sum, I wanted to be certain that this committee knows that the primary curriculum platform used by the EAA is not student-centered, nor is it a curriculum that is innovative or individualized. In terms of its questionable research basis, it is significant to note that, although the EAA is formally associated with Eastern Michigan University, an EMU faculty member shared with me that their College of Education has had no input on the EAA curriculum and computer learning platform. Perhaps this is an area that this committee might look into.

Thank you.

Thomas C. Pedroni
Associate Professor, Curriculum Studies